



## Have a go!

Make a pair of rods using a metal coat hanger. Bend into an L shape, with the section in your hand long enough to cross the width of your hand with a centimetre either side. The long section should measure at least 25cm.

Hold the rods like a cowboy with two pistols. Make sure they are not resting on top of your forefingers. Keep your upper arm vertical, lower arm horizontal. Relax your mind but stay alert. Fix a picture in your mind of what you are looking for.

The rods should be pointing straight ahead. This is the search position. Walk forward slowly, keeping the picture of the target in your mind. Recite: 'I want the rods to cross when I reach what I am seeking.'

As you approach the target you should begin to feel the rods move. Don't stop when this happens. Keep moving forwards until the rods completely overlap each other, across your chest. The target will then be under your feet.



## 'I've met several leading professionals who accept that dowsing works'

**JOHN BAKER** found he could dowse through a bit of fun at a friend's house fifteen years ago. Walking up and down a yard with a couple of bent metal rods, he found they began moving of their own accord - crossing inwards when he stood over what he was later told was a water pipe, and shooting outwards when he was above, unbeknown to him, an electric cable. Wanting solid proof of his new-found skill, he joined a local archaeological group. 'They were working on a Saxon burial ground. When I started picking up graves where they then found human remains, they were happy to have me helping them.'

Investigative techniques in archaeology have become increasingly sophisticated, lessening the number of exploratory digs, but dowsing might be the non-invasive concept in its purest form. 'That's the beauty of it,' says John. 'And it's inexpensive, too; but you'll never get an eminent archaeologist to stand up among others and admit it works, even though



I've met several leading professionals who accept that it does.' One hired him recently to work at Sissinghurst (above), in the search to find the site of the original manor house. Given no prior information other than that he was searching for a timber-framed building, John honed in on a specific spot and marked off the outlines of the outer walls of a building, which conformed in shape to other known manors in the area. John is giving a dowsing workshop at Sissinghurst on 30 July (call 01580 710700).



Whether viewed as ancient superstition or mysterious skill, the art of dowsing has its share of protagonists and disbelievers. Practised for thousands of years, it is used to search for targets that exist but can't be seen. Today, as JACK WATKINS reveals, it has its uses on Trust sites

# A curious practice

The ancient practice of dowsing is about more than finding water. It is used to search for myriad underground features – gas mains, cables, even archaeological features like walls and cavities. You can also dowse to search for lost items, pets or people. Some dowse to help their health, to pinpoint allergies; others to locate subtle 'earth energies'. The names of the tools used by dowsters – dowsing rods, pendulums, wands and arameters – seem to summon you into a world of medieval alchemy. At their mere mention, minds of a scientific bent snap firmly shut. This is cranks' territory they say, with no place in rational, modern life. In fact, right now, as you read this, there will be someone, somewhere in the world, dowsing in the employ of a water or oil company, or maybe even for the police, using their skills in search of a missing person. Dismissed by many as a purely esoteric hobby, dowsing, it seems, has many practical, if seldom publicly credited, uses. 'To dowse', according to the British Society of Dowsters, 'is to search, with the aid of simple hand-held tools or instruments, for that which is otherwise hidden from view or knowledge.' The activity probably dates back to prehistory, when our ancestors utilised it to source water. It is thought that the Egyptians in the age of the ►

LEFT: Just as dowsing was once employed by the Cornish mining industry in the sixteenth century, here German miners dowse for metals in 1556 using a *wünschelrute* (a dowsing rod)

## 'I get a bucketful of bits of bent wire and ask visitors if they'd like a go'



**JOHN DENNIS** runs sessions for visitors to try out dowsing every summer at Plas Newydd, where he has been Head Gardener for 29 years. 'I get a bucketful of bits of bent

wire and ask them if they want to have a go. I do it near to a spring running into a culvert, but I don't tell them where it is, or even what they are searching for. I just watch to see if the wires move. For some they do, for others they don't.' He says some people grip them harder when they see the rods moving to try to stop them. Other participants, often those working for water boards or electricity companies, say they

use dowsing all the time, and how it is better than metal detecting. Some 'just throw the wires away, or refuse to take part at all'.

John first started dowsing soon after he arrived at the property. 'I was trying to trace a water pipe. It worked straight away for me, but I was never sceptical. I think you should "believe" a thing first and then discover if it works, rather than initially taking a negative approach.' As well as searching for burst water pipes or leaking drains, he has conducted experiments for lost objects, with great success. He often uses a pendulum – an old watch chain, 23cm long, with a small weight on the end – that generally swings in a circular motion, but if asked for a 'yes' or a 'no', it swings left to right or vice versa, depending on the response.



## Need to know?

- Dowsing was historically referred to as rhabdomancy. Ever since written records have been kept, the art of dowsing has been recorded. A cave painting in the Sahara, dated to approximately 6000BC, shows what looks like someone dowsing.
- The early Jews used dowsing and recorded the fact in the Old Testament.
- During the Middle Ages dowsing became associated with the mystical unknown. In this age of witchcraft, dowsers kept their practice quiet.

- In seventeenth-century France Baron and Baroness de Beausoleil established a successful mineral mining company using dowsing to search for potential new mines. The art remained mystical, however, and was banned by the Catholic Church. The de Beausoleils ended their lives in the Bastille after revealing their use of alchemy.

- Dowsing enjoyed a revival under the Victorians.
- Both the American and British armies have used the craft.

split reeds as divining rods. Yet a dual image seems always to have dogged the craft. Practitioners in medieval times were often labelled sorcerers, but in the sixteenth century, dowsers played a big role in the development of the Cornish mining industry. In the nineteenth century, two leading British exponents, Messrs Mullins and Tompkins, went into business together to locate water for the drilling of wells and boreholes. 'No water, no fee' was their confident sales pitch. Victorians were the first seriously to attempt to explain how dowsing worked, though a conclusive explanation eludes us still.

One theory has it that water and minerals give off electro-magnetic energy, which is somehow registered by the dowser through the movement of the divining rod. That doesn't explain how some can dowse for an object the other side of the world by holding a pendulum over a map. 'We need to accept that dowsing involves the mind,' says John Moss, Director of the British Society of Dowsers. 'If you accept quantum physics, and the idea that everything is connected on a quantum level, it's a short leap to the idea that perhaps the subconscious mind can access information from the physical world, becoming visible through the movement of the dowsing tool.'

The eminent archaeologist Professor Tom Lethbridge, drawing on Einstein, once wrote: 'Magic is simply the use of powers of the mind that are not yet understood by science.' There's nothing 'spooky' about dowsing, and with a bit of practice and maybe some tuition, anyone can become proficient at it – as the National Trust, which has, unofficially, been putting it to use for some years, well knows.

● **The British Society of Dowsers** runs courses for beginners to specialist standard. Visit [www.britishdowsers.org](http://www.britishdowsers.org); call 011684 576969.



Above: Dowsers Jack Timms, who found more than 1,000 hidden water supplies, at work in 1937. Opposite top: Jacques Aymar successfully used dowsing in seventeenth-century France to track down murderers

## 'We are all born with the ability, and it's said to be strongest in children'

**PETER GOLDING** was an electronics engineer on the military airfields of Saudi Arabia when he first experienced dowsing. 'I knew nothing about it until someone showed me this "old civil engineer's trick" for locating

inspection pits revealed the building was sitting in a bowl of water barely a metre from the surface. 'Our job was to find the underground culverts that should have been draining this water away. We traced the line of one of them by marking out the points where the rods were crossing, and it enabled us to determine where there was a blockage. They later excavated and confirmed this was the cause.'

John says that once he finds a source, he stands over it and does a number countdown until the motion of the rod enables him to estimate the water's depth below ground, and even its flow, quality and pH levels. He can also dowse 'remotely' by holding a pendulum over a map, or applying spiritual energy for long-distance healing merely by use of a photograph. In accounting for his gift he says: 'There's a universal mind: everything is connected with everything else. We are all born with the ability, and it's said to be strongest in children. But if you don't use it, you lose it.'



underground power lines. From then on I was using it for all sorts of things, including cables and lost objects, and even showing Bedouin Arabs where to drill water boreholes.' Back in England he has used his skills on several Trust sites, most recently at Croft Castle where he dowsed to find an underground stream that enabled one of the estate reservoirs to be replenished.

He and a colleague have also come to the aid of Packwood House, which had a long-standing problem with rising damp. An